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ABSTRACT

The single greatest issue facing American education today is how to improve the education of low achievers and other students at risk of school failure. Currently, elementary school students who have fallen behind academically are placed into special classes designed to eliminate those deficiencies. Students meet in a small group with either a resource specialist or an instructional aide for about half an hour each day. This half-hour is the result of a redistribution of instructional time and adds nothing to the total amount of instructional time the student receives. Most of the programs require that students be pulled out of the regular classroom to meet with a resource specialist. Those schools that use instructional aides for in-class instead of pull out programs usually do so for the pragmatic reason that a half-day aide is cheaper to support than a full-time credentialed teacher. However, research indicates that the instructional program, not its setting, is the key to program effectiveness. The following critical strategies for improving the education of at-risk students are discussed: (1) make at-risk students a priority in the school; (2) take a comprehensive approach; (3) invest in staff development; (4) raise expectations for at-risk students; (5) provide more quality time for learning; (6) coordinate instruction for each student; and (7) intervene as early as possible. A list of nine references is appended. (FMW)

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# WHAT SCHOOLS CAN DO FOR STUDENTS AT RISK

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# WHAT SCHOOLS CAN DO FOR STUDENTS AT RISK*

The single greatest issue facing American education today is how to do a better job of educating low achievers and other students at risk of school failure. If we don't, we're facing a crisis of immense proportions -- not only educationally, but economically and socially as well.

Already, a fourth of the nation's ninth graders don't complete high school, and many of those who do graduate lack the necessary academic, vocational or social skills to become productive members of society. At the same time, teenagers are experimenting with drugs at increasingly early ages; the incidence of teenage pregnancies is on the rise; and youth gangs are running wild in some communities. These students at risk are overrepresented among the poor, ethnic and linguistic minorities, and single-parent families. But they're not just black or Hispanic; in fact, most are white.

America can no longer afford the luxury of educating only a portion of its young. We need an educated and skilled workforce if we're going to continue to compete internationally. The nearly half a million youngsters who drop out every year are frozen out of the economy. Not only are they poorly prepared for work, the labor market for them is drying up. In the last 15 years, the earning power of 20-24 year-old male high school graduates has fallen 28%. For high school dropouts, the figure is over 40%, and for minority dropouts, even worse. While some may claim that the high school diploma has been devalued, in terms of jobs, it hasn't lost its luster.

All of us must come to realize that this problem doesn't just belong to the students, or their teachers, or their parents. It affects every American. And if it hasn't already, it will soon. As Governor Clinton of Arkansas has said, "No matter how bad you think it is, it's worse."[1] And it's not getting any better.

What can be done for the third graders who are already two grade-levels behind in math, or the freshman in high school who never really learned how to read? What about the two teenage boys at the back of the room trying to disrupt

* This paper is based upon a keynote address given at the Arizona School Administrators' Conference; May, 1989.

the teacher's lesson, or the teenage mother who's already pregnant again? Or the increasing percentage of our youth for whom drugs and alcohol are a part of daily life?

What can be done to better educate American youngsters and stem the tide of school dropouts? Some say early childhood education is the answer; we should concentrate on prevention. Others place their bets on drug education. Both these alternatives make sense, and so do many others. But, there are a lot of serious social problems facing students today (drugs, gangs, teen pregnancy, basic health needs, to name a few) that magnify the overall problem, and they must be confronted. As with most complex problems, there is really no single solution.

My own starting point in searching for solutions is the school. Not only do schools play a crucial role in students' lives, but we are also learning more about the promising approaches schools can take. Ultimately, of course, we will need the cooperation of community agencies, businesses, parents, and government. At the center, however, are the schools. In this paper, I focus on what they are doing now and what they can do better.

I begin by briefly describing the types of educational services they currently receive. Then I list several areas where we need to focus our attention, and offer suggestions for what we need to do if we're going to make any headway.

## Current Services

What are schools doing now for that one-third to one-half of our students who are most at risk of school failure? The answer to that question will vary widely from district to district and from school to school. Schools can take advantage of a complex array of federal, state and local categorical programs, from Chapter 1 to the district-sponsored dropout prevention effort. How programs are implemented across schools can be very different, depending upon staffing, materials, beliefs, and economic conditions. Nevertheless, I will attempt to sketch briefly some aspects of what we do for the "typical" at-risk students' instructional day.

In general, students who have fallen behind academically are placed into special classes designed to eliminate their deficiencies. In elementary schools, students who are behind meet in a small

group with a resource specialist or instructional aide for about a half hour each day. In the small group, they may complete a worksheet or take turns reading aloud.

This half hour, however, usually adds little to the total amount of instructional time students receive.[2] Most typically, the school just redistributes a fixed amount of instructional time, either in the classroom or in pullout settings. How can we expect this small intervention to have a significant impact on students' progress?

Students usually are pulled out of the regular classroom to another place in the school. In fact, over 90% of the schools with Chapter 1 programs use some version of the pullout. Of course, there is a lot of variation in exactly how it's implemented: how much amount time is allotted, who the instructor is, and what is missed. Some schools, for example, may replace a regular reading lesson over a nine-week period, during which students don't attend the regular class at all.

Most schools use instructional aides for in-class programs and resource teachers for pullouts. Many use a combination. A general trend away from pullouts seems to be occurring, but usually less for ideological reasons than pragmatic ones. It's cheaper to put an aide in the classroom for half a day than to support another credentialed teacher.

Simply moving the lesson into the class isn't the answer -- not even to the question of stigma. While some continue to debate the relative merits of in-class versus pullout, it's becoming clear that the **location** is less important than the type of instruction, who provided it, and the content of lessons. The first decision in designing services for at-risk students should **NOT** be whether to run an in-class or a pullout program, but what the student needs to learn and who best can provide it. As Bob Slavin puts it, the debate over in-class and pullout "has been resolved: both are equally ineffective."[3] The problem isn't the setting, but the instructional program students are offered.

## What Can Schools Do For Students At Risk?

There are any number of ways to go about making the educational experiences of the at-risk student better. A couple were mentioned earlier. For

schools, there are seven strategies that I view as absolutely critical. These may not sound particularly new; it's true that there's no magic bullet. Nevertheless, I feel confident that if schools will adopt the approaches described here, they will begin to make a difference. My suggestions are based in part on my own research and that of others; but they also grow out of more than ten years of observing in schools, talking to teachers, students, and administrators, and thinking hard about the issue.

1. Make students at risk a priority in the school.

Perhaps the most important step in providing a better education for those most at risk of school failure is to recognize that their progress is everyone's responsibility, both at the school and district level. These students don't just "belong" to the Chapter 1 teacher, the Resource Specialist, the counselors or the English as a Second Language staff.

Everyone in the school needs to decide to take responsibility for all the students and take seriously the notion that "All students can learn." This phrase must be more than just a cliché. As Jerome Bruner said it more than 25 years ago:

> Any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development.[4]

Not only can all students learn, but they can learn the same lesson content. Assigning a watered-down curriculum to students who are behind is a disgrace. Instead of lowered expectations, the goal for educating every student should be grade-level performance in the district's core curriculum. It is becoming increasingly clear, however, that this will not be accomplished by merely separating students for short periods of time into slower-paced remedial lessons. If students who are two grade-levels or more behind are ever going to have a chance of performing well on the regular curriculum, schools will have to take more drastic action.

Unfortunately, moving slower kids back into the mainstream curriculum is not often the target. Instead, special classes and "dumbed-down" worksheets develop into a remedial track, a track that never rejoins the regular one. As students follow that course, the achievement gap widens so that you find

students in the 10th grade who are still calculating percents and adding fractions -- and still can't read. With this kind of treatment, it's no wonder that kids drop out.

2. Take a comprehensive approach.

Second, schools must be comprehensive in designing services. A piecemeal approach, adding another little program here and there, may appear to be effective in the short run, but does not offer a permanent solution. We need to think in terms of a more sustained effort that begins with the students' regular program, then attends to special services, and later involves parents and the community, and links with social services. Improvement efforts should be concentrated at the school site; what works at one school may not work at another.

The first step in this process is to concentrate on improving the students' regular program. There is evidence to show, for example, that improvement efforts directed toward at-risk students will "radiate up" and improve the entire school. A "trickle-down" approach, on the other hand, that focuses on the school's high-achievers, may do little to help the students at the bottom.[5] Consider, therefore, how the core classes for students at risk can be strengthened through increased staffing, staff development, or time for coordination and planning.

Chapter 1 or special education classes are important supplements and can make an important difference in students' learning, but they can't be expected to carry the load. In our study of Chapter 1 (see Footnote 2), we found that the program accounted for only about 30 minutes per day in the schools we looked at; and it added very little to the total amount of instruction students received. Ideally, improvements can be made in both the regular and supplemental programs -- they can be merged, as in a schoolwide Chapter 1 program. Upgrading the categorical or compensatory services is only a partial approach.

Schools also need to think about how to involve parents, the community, and local businesses. In each case, however, we must not lose sight of the underlying purpose, which is to improve student learning. All too often, parent or business involvement consists of little more than PTA meetings and an annual Open House. We need to explore ways to engage parents of at-risk students

more fully in their children's education, both at home and at school. In the same way, business involvement should be more direct and more meaningful; most business partners want to participate, not just contribute.

3. Invest in staff development.

An investment in local staff development could make a significant difference for at-risk students. Programs for high-risk students are only as good as the teachers and aides who run them. But training for all school staff is also important for raising awareness and setting priorities. Under the new Chapter 1 legislation, furthermore, resources can be used to provide staff development and training to all school personnel who work with Chapter 1 students. Librarians, instructional aides, and pupil services personnel can all upgrade their skills.

However, let's be clear that a couple of half-day workshops will not be sufficient. To make a substantial impact, a sustained staff development program that spans not only months, but years, should be planned.

At the beginning, sessions might focus on raising staff awareness of the needs and characteristics of the school's at-risk population -- with the accompanying message that all students can learn. Students will seldom go beyond their teachers' expectations. Teachers need to learn about diverse student populations and increase their sensitivity toward them. At present, teacher preparation programs are not satisfying this need.

Later workshops could introduce instructional strategies shown to be effective with low-achievers, or offer suggestions for teaching low-achievers within the context of the regular classroom. These might include cooperative learning, problem-solving, or reciprocal teaching.

Staff development doesn't need to be limited to workshops alone. It's productive, for example, to set aside planning and coordination time for staff. Teachers and other staff need time to plan, digest, discuss, and try out new approaches. Another option is for experienced resource teachers to offer demonstration lessons. As a variation on this approach, the school can schedule time for regular and special program staff to observe in other settings, or other schools.

At the same time, teachers and other staff can begin to take more responsibility for the total program. If serving the underserved really becomes a priority, then a logical outcome would be greater involvement of teachers in designing and developing program. Shared decision-making and school-based management are popular phrases these days. Simply assigning teachers more responsibility, however, won't do the trick. Well-designed planning and training needs to be provided for faculty/staff as they assume a larger role in the management of the school.

Schools also need to think about providing staff development for instructional aides (and the teachers they work with). How to use an aide (or how to work with a teacher) is not something you get in teacher education programs. Yet, the teacher-aide staffing pattern is becoming increasingly common. In Long Beach, aides are undergraduate students from the local college. Each is required to complete an intensive 12-hour training in the summer before they can enter a classroom.

4. Raise expectations for students at risk.

In many schools, most of the instruction for low-achievers consists of drilling on lower-order skills. Even students who can read with comprehension work on decoding exercises. Math emphasizes computation, rather than application. As a result, students operate within a culture of worksheets made up of simple, repetitive exercises. Schools can do better than that; and so can the students.

Instead, let's try to eliminate worksheets that focus on low-level, word-level skills, drill & practice. What we saw in our study was worksheet-driven instruction. Most Chapter 1 students were completing 8 to 10 worksheets per day. A teacher in Tennessee told us how happy she was with the computer lab they had because it enabled students to repeat things over and over. These students have to do something 15,000 times before they learn it, she said.

A recent article in Educational Leadership reported on a study conducted in Utah with 7th grade math students. Students were randomly assigned to three groups, remedial, slower-paced, and pre-algebra. Findings showed the pre-algebra students performed better than the other two groups on basic skills. They didn't learn much pre-algebra, but they learned more

arithmetic and problem-solving skills than those studying them directly. Not only that, the students in the advanced class became more active learners and participated more. Those in the remedial class actually lost ground relative to other students in the school. Some issues are yet to be resolved, like the effect of the mixed groups or different materials, but studies like this should cause us to reconsider our expectations for such students.

The notion that all learning is hierarchical, that students need to learn low-level skills before learning more complex ones is now generally discounted among both math educators and reading/language arts specialists. Teachers must raise their expectations for the students who are behind and focus on developing more advanced skills. They are capable of problem solving and critical thinking, if given the chance. I've seen students who read with understanding with one teacher, but then were required only to practice phonics with another. If they can read, they don't need to review letter-sound correspondence. Is it any wonder that most students think school is boring?

We should be trying to develop independent learners, and the only way to do that is to offer students challenges that allow them to learn how to learn. Teachers' questions should cause students to reflect on what they've read, or what someone has said. They should be led to clarify, summarize, and predict, instead of simply coming up with a one-word answer. Lessons devoted to factual recall, after all, are little more than verbal worksheets.

5. Provide more quality time.

Research has shown that providing students with the **opportunity to learn**, or giving them more time to learn the content to be tested, is strongly related to student achievement. Despite the obvious good sense of such an approach, only 2% of districts operating Chapter 1 programs exercise this option and run extra classes before school or during the summer. By comparison, virtually all Japanese kids go to "juko."

If schools really want to make a difference in what students are learning, they need to see how they can extend the instructional day through before-school, after-school, Saturday, or summer programs. Bob Slavin's "Success for All" and Hank Levin's Accelerated Schools, for example, both use this alternative, adding time to the regular day. How can

we expect kids to make up the achievement gaps without giving them more time to do it?

I'm willing to grant that the logistics for providing extra time may be complex. The bus schedule may have to be adjusted, and many students (especially those who need help most) don't want to stay after school. Nevertheless, if you believe it's worth trying, you'll find a way. Others have. Some schools have added another bus. Teachers are paid an hourly rate for the extra time in some cases--and eager to do it. College students, parents, grandparents also take part in some programs. Family math programs have been quite successful, for example. To make the added time more attractive to students, teachers can extend the academic curriculum to include educational computer games or other recreational activities.

6. Coordinate instruction for each student.

In many schools, services for at-risk students are so poorly coordinated that supplemental programs for at-risk students operate in near isolation. The special education students are the responsibility of the special education teacher; the limited-English-proficient are under the care of the bilingual or ESL staff; Chapter 1 students; and Chapter 1 staff. As a measure of this isolation, regular classroom teachers typically have little or no idea what's happening in the Chapter 1 classes. And Chapter 1 instructors aren't informed about the regular lessons. Instead of a logical set of classes that support and complement each other, at-risk students follow fragmented schedules, determined only by their eligibility for various categorical programs. The more programs a student qualifies for, the more fragmented his schedule.

Under these circumstances, it's up to the disadvantaged student to make the connections between these and other lessons. If he were capable of making those connections, he probably wouldn't be eligible for the program in the first place. An instructional program for these students should make sense, and be designed to meet the students' needs. The design of services should be driven by **students' needs**, not funding regulations.

Schools need to provide time for teachers, resource specialists, instructional aides, and others to plan, discuss and review what's best for

students. But that won't work unless it's specifically built into the schedule.

7. Intervene early.

There is evidence to show that if you provide students in early grades with intensive tutoring as soon as they begin to fall behind their peers, you can avoid the bigger problems later on. The Reading Recovery Program, for example, gives first graders one-on-one tutoring in 20-minute chunks for up to 20 weeks. Afterwards, most are able to return to regular reading lessons and never need any more special help.

Instead, most schools wait until students are already two grade-levels behind before they do anything. In some districts, for example, a student has to score in the bottom quartile on standardized tests before he or she is eligible for the Chapter 1 program. In the meantime, many of those nearer the average score are slipping farther behind.

There is, of course, no reason to expect schools to behave any differently from the general public. How many people really practice preventive medicine, for example? We wait until a problem develops and then we try to "fix" it. With our young people, however, a different approach is needed. Unless we begin to intervene early, the numbers of tenth graders who can't read with comprehension or solve simple mathematical problems will only multiply.

## Summary

Once again, there is nothing magical about the strategies I have in mind; in fact, some may seem fairly obvious. Nevertheless, I'm convinced that they are still not a part of most schools. But things are changing. From the federal government to the local school, educators are beginning to take a fresh look at what we're doing for the bottom third, for the students most at risk. Some of the impetus for change comes from business; some from within the education community. Whatever the source, after 25 years of attention toward the educationally disadvantaged, students at risk, and potential dropouts, we're finally making progress. I think we can be hopeful that conditions for those students in the next 25 years -- even the next five -- will be very different.

## FOOTNOTES

[1]Keynote address at the National Dropout Prevention Conference; San Diego, CA; April, 1989.

[2]Rowan, B., & Guthrie, L.F. (1989). The quality of Chapter 1 instruction. In R.E. Slavin, N.L. Karweit, & N.A. Madden (Eds.), Effective programs for students at risk. New York: Allyn & Bacon, Inc.

[3]Slavin, R.E. (1988, October). Back up the bucks with effective programs for Chapter 1 children. R&D Preview, 3(2), 12.

[4]Bruner, J.S. (1960). The process of education. New York, NY: Random House, Inc.

[5]MDC, Inc. (1988). America's shame, America's hope: Twelve million youth at risk. Chapel Hill, NC: Author.

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